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SUBJECT: INTERVIEWS WITH VISAS-93 APPLICANTS SHOW SOME PROGRESS IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

REF: A) HCMC 968 B) HCMC 962 and previous

11. (SBU) Summary. HCMC's Refugee Resettlement Section recently concluded interviews of 124 ethnic minority families as part of the VISAS-93 reunification process for Central Highlands ethnic minority families. This was the first time that ConGen staff have had completely unfettered access to a large number of ethnic minority individuals from across the Central Highlands. The applicants were relatives of ethnic minority individuals who fled Vietnam after unrest in the Central Highlands in 2001. The results of these interviews confirm improvements in the lives of ethnic minority families -- including on issues of religious freedom -- in almost all the provinces of the Central Highlands. Although police maintain a very visible presence in ethnic minority villages, the interviewees did not complain of official brutality and acknowledged that police focus on control of ethnic minority separatist activities. The exception to the positive trend is Dak Lak, which, not surprisingly, also has been the only province that has failed to issue any passports for these persons under the VISAS 93 program. End Summary.

A Unique Window on Conditions in the Central Highlands

12. (SBU) Beginning in March, HCMC's Refugee and Resettlement Section interviewed 124 Central Highlands ethnic minority families as part of their family reunification (VISAS 93) processing, with the majority of the interviews taking place in August and September. 58 were from Gia Lai, 54 from Dak Lak, seven from Dak Nong, four from Kontum, and one from Lam Dong. These individuals traveled to HCMC twice; first for an initial pre-screening interview and later for an interview with a United States Citizenship and Immigration Services officer. ConGen PolOffs observed some interviews in August and September, all of which were conducted by U.S. citizens. This cable summarizes the findings from these unfiltered accounts of conditions for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

Infrastructure and Education

13. (SBU) The interviewees indicated that almost all villages have electricity. Although most villages do not have an integrated water supply, access to water is not an issue: the villagers use wells, manual water pumps, or their own gravity-fed systems of bamboo pipes and channels to funnel the water from streams near their homes. The interviewees also noted that the educational level in their villages is rising. They confirm that many minority children are receiving subsidized education and most children now have at least some primary education. Some said a few children had finished secondary school (ninth grade).

13. (SBU) Almost all the interviewees were farmers who told us they scratched out a living usually growing rice and coffee, supplemented by manual day labor in local rubber and coffee plantations. Many told us that they depended on money transfers from their relatives in the U.S. to supplement their incomes. From 2002 to 2004, it was difficult to receive money from overseas. However, for the most part the situation has improved. Families now receive money transfers through local post offices and banks. There are few problems with money transfers of USD 200 or less. With larger transfers, police officials temporarily confiscate some or all the money pending investigation. According to the interviewees, the police seek to vet who sent the funds, the intended recipient and intended use. In most cases, the families reported that they eventually received the funds from police. In a few cases they still are waiting. For example, one ethnic minority woman told us that police had temporarily seized 500 dollars sent by her husband from the U.S., telling her that they feared that she would use the money to purchase cell phones for separatist activists. (Note: Officials in the Central Highlands have alleged that organizations outside Vietnam funnel money into the region to support ethnic minority separatism. End note.)

Religious Freedom

14. (SBU) With the exception of Dak Lak province, the interviewees made it clear that religious freedom conditions are improving gradually in the Central Highlands. Protestants can gather to worship so long as they are not affiliated with the "Dega Protestant" movement. Protestants in Dak Lak province face a much

more restrictive environment. One family from the village of Buon Ru in Dak Lak claimed that all bibles in the hamlet were confiscated and that Protestantism was banned formally in 2002. As far as the family knew, this was only a hamlet policy; they understood that conditions for religious practice were better in other areas. However, one applicant from a village near the provincial capital of Buon Ma Thuot said that she had to sign a document in July 2005 agreeing not to have more than ten people in her house at any time. Another family in a village in Cu Mgar District stated that officially they were not even allowed to pray at home but local police allowed them to do so within their immediate family.

Ever-Present Officials and Dega Separatism

15. (SBU) Officials and police appear to maintain a very visible presence in every ethnic minority village. The majority of the police and government officials are ethnic Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) although some are from the ethnic minority communities as well. Police monitoring was more intense for those individuals and families that officials suspected of having participated in protests in 2001 and 2004 or of having ties to the ethnic separatist Dega movement. Many of the interviewees confirmed that family members, including spouses in the United States, had participated in the ethnic minority protests in the Central Highlands in 2001. A number acknowledged that family members had been involved in the Dega movement.

16. (SBU) In all provinces, police interviewed the family members after the flight of their anchors to Cambodia. Their actual treatment differed greatly depending on the province. In Gia Lai and Dak Nong, families were interviewed several times but not harmed. Dak Lak proved to be different as applicants reported incidents of physical harassment such as beatings or slapping during police interviews.

17. (SBU) A number of applicants from villages in Dak Lak reported that they or their children had been detained by police stations for questioning. In 2002, an applicant's adult son was held for eight days and questioned two or three times daily to determine whether or not he brought food and/or money to his father and others hiding in the forests after the 2001 protests. In 2001, a family of three was detained for nearly one month in Buon Ma Thuot because they tried to escape to Cambodia. In another case an applicant was detained twice for two days in December 2004 and in March 2005 to "study the dangers of following people who might urge her to take part in demonstrations." Another applicant was detained over Christmas 2004 for 13 days for "spreading wrong information over the telephone." In the beginning of 2005, a woman was kept at the District Police Officer for three days because "she had a lot of overseas calls." Dak Lak-based applicants also reported an oppressive police environment in their villages. Police would drive by their homes continually, watch the house all-day/night, follow the applicant and family members, and search homes at any time. One woman in the Dak Lak commune of Ea Bar stated that she was placed under surveillance for 24 months due to her suspected affiliation with FULRO, the officially defunct ethnic minority armed resistance organization. Other reported forms of harassment in Dak Lak included a claim from a family living in Buon Ru village that their home was burned down and their well was poisoned by other villagers and local authorities in December 2004. Another Dak Lak resident claimed that her cell phone was confiscated because she made "too many" international calls.

The VISA 93 Process

18. (SBU) All interviewees reported that they had to receive official permission to travel outside of their immediate village area. Most were not stopped along the way or questioned en route to HCMC for their two interviews. The majority of applicants from provinces other than Dak Lak reported that they did not face harassment upon their return to their village after their initial pre-screening interview. Again, Dak Lak was the exception. Dak Lak residents complained that documents needed for their VISAS 93 interview, such as their household registration book, the immigration package from RRS, and their applications for passports, were held by the police for up to a month; that the applicants were ordered to report to local police after their initial RRS interviews and threatened that they would not be allowed to return for their second interview; one applicant from Ea Bar commune reportedly was told that "traitors' wives are sure not to leave Vietnam." (Note: While no Dak Lak Visas 93 applicant has yet to receive a passport from provincial authorities, almost all applicants were able to return to HCMC for their second interview with the USCIS officer. Moreover, Dak Lak has continued to cooperate with legacy refugee programs and issues needed documents and passports to those beneficiaries, whose anchors in the U.S. had left Vietnam under a program sanctioned by the GVN. End note.)

19. (SBU) Interviewees from provinces other than Dak Lak generally did not complain that officials were obstructing the issuance of passports and other travel documents. Many delays in passport processing could be ascribed, at least in part, to the ethnic

minority applicants failing to have basic documents such as birth and marriage certificates that local officials required. These documents, often based on affidavits, needed to be issued or reissued before a passport application could be completed, a process that local and provincial officials were facilitating. For example, some applicants noted that local officials were actively assisting them in filling out their passport applications. Delays were further compounded by confusion and ignorance within local bureaucracies on how to handle these cases. Applicants were often sent to multiple places to pick up or submit paperwork. The situation is particularly acute in Dak Nong, which split off from Dak Lak in January 2004, creating new administrative challenges for the applicants and officials as paperwork and records are sorted out and the bureaucracy reorganizes. Most applicants reported that officials did not solicit bribes. When they did, the bribes amounted to less than USD 20 per case.

10. (SBU) Albeit slow, every province save Dak Lak has recorded progress in issuing passports to applicants. For example, to date Gia Lai has issued passports to 30 applicant families. Dak Lak has not processed any of the 54 VISAS 93 cases currently on file. Many Dak Lak-based applicants reported during their interviews with us that local officials refused to process paperwork for individuals whose sponsor in the United States had left Vietnam illegally or was suspected of involvement in anti-government activities. Some reported that Dak Lak officials refused to accept or to process their paperwork without giving any explanation.

11. (SBU) Comment: The results of our interviews reinforce our own observations that -- outside of Dak Lak -- the situation for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands has been improving over the past year (reftels). It is particularly significant that this particular cohort is reporting this gradual positive change. As the left-behind family of persons who fled Vietnam after anti-government protests in 2001, this group would have been an obvious target for official harassment and retribution. End Comment.

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